

Keith Gilyard, *Louise Thompson Patterson: A Life of Struggle for Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). 328 pp. Cloth \$94.95, Paperback \$26.95.

Louise Thompson Patterson: A Life of Struggle for Justice is a major contribution to African American women's and Left historiographies. Gilyard joins an impressive cohort of scholars, including Robin D. G. Kelley, Gerald Horne, Erik McDuffie, Carol Boyce Davies, Dayo Gore, Minkah Makalani, and others whose publications explore Black Left Feminism and African Americans' less familiar political affiliations with the Communist Party (CPUSA) and other Left and radical organizations. At the same time Gilyard advances scholarship on black women's political activism, offering a detailed and intellectual biography on one of the Communist Party's most significant transnational freedom fighters and political writers and thinkers: Louise Thompson Patterson. Gilyard deepens scholars' interpretations of African American women, using Patterson's political trajectory to broadly demonstrate black women's attraction to the CPUSA, their interconnected liberation efforts, their varying personal and political relationships, and their constant refashioning of women's political and intellectual work throughout the twentieth century. He argues that Patterson "embodied resistance to racial, economic, and gender exploitation, moving beyond theory to action" (2).

Mining an array of primary sources, including newspapers, letters, organization records, oral history collections, and government documents, Gilyard brilliantly weaves Patterson's personal life with her political career. He spends a considerable amount of time exploring the complexities of Patterson's interior world, showing the different ways in which the seasoned transnational activist delicately balanced the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood while vigorously challenging global oppression and brutality. In this vein, Gilyard's study is quite unique, offering readers glimpses of Patterson's personal disappointments and vulnerabilities, as well as the challenges she encountered as a CPUSA member and an outspoken critic of black middle-class ideas about respectability and American capitalism. As Gilyard puts it,

this story is largely one of a woman who rejected offers and opportunities to construct a sterling mainstream reputation and to pursue a materially comfortable professional life. Instead, despite the privilege of a college education and even her light complexion, she opted to traverse the harder path and committed herself to some of the most difficult struggles of her times for political transformation (3).

Chapters center on Patterson's early life living on the West Coast; her close and loving relationship with her mother, who served as one of her political inspi-

rations; her mid-1920s migration to Harlem, the “Negro Capital of the world,” and her varying personal and professional relationships and alliances with some of New York City’s most prominent and well-known political activists and thinkers, intellectuals, and cultural workers. These included Langston Hughes, Dorothy West, Harry Haywood, W. E. B. Du Bois, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard B. Moore, Zora Neale Hurston, and Patterson’s first and second husbands Wallace Thurman and William L. Patterson. This new vanguard of “New Negro” reformers, according to intellectual and writer Alain Locke, embraced liberation ideologies and strategies that emphasized self-respect and determination, black militancy, economic nationalism, and global equality and solidarity. Gilyard delineates that Patterson’s migration to Harlem and encounters with “New Negro” Harlemites was politically transformative and broadened her ideas about the black liberation struggle.

Gilyard highlights Patterson’s political contributions in thirteen well-research chapters. He shows the span and reach of the Patterson’s work as a political activist and intellectual, connecting her to numerous intersecting political and cultural movements throughout the twentieth century. Her struggle to end global inequality and oppression linked her to Black Marxism, Black Left feminism, and the Black Power movement. Varying national and international socioeconomic and political conditions of the 1930s, including the Great Depression, the Scottsboro Boys case, and the Marxist organization’s evolving position on the “Negro Question,” drew Patterson to the CPUSA. She belonged to a small yet significant group of early twentieth century African American women that joined the CPUSA and other Left organizations. Radical CPUSA women, such as Harlem activists Williana Burroughs and Marvel Cooke, were effective community mobilizers and national Left leaders. They wrote for and distributed radical left-wing publications such as *The Daily Worker*, served as CPUSA representatives at national and international conferences, and viewed the CPUSA as a way to advance black equality, women’s rights, decolonization, economic justice, and international solidarity. Patterson’s Left activism spanned over four decades. Despite black middle-class disapproval and skepticism of Left politics, anti-Communist rhetoric and McCarthyism, and racial inequality within the CPUSA, Patterson recruited and travelled internationally, became national secretary of the CPUSA-operated fraternal order the International Worker Order (IWO), and established the black-feminist Sojourners for Truth and Justice with artists and political activists Beah Richards, Alice Childress, and Charlotte Bass. Moreover, Patterson, as a seasoned activist, mentored a new generation of young revolutionaries. In the later chapters of the book, Gilyard builds on historians Dayo Gore and Erik McDuffie’s analyses, linking 1930s radical women with Post-World War II black women’s Left activism.

Although not part of the Civil Rights or Black Power movement, Patterson fostered political ties with 1950s and 1960s civil rights and radical leaders—those that actively challenged global capitalism, economic and working-class inequality, imperialism and fascism, and race and gender discrimination. During the

Black Power era, Patterson became a leading figure in one of the biggest legal cases against an African American female communist. In 1970, Thompson, with her second husband and CPUSA leader William Patterson, became involved in the Free Angela Davis campaign. At the age of sixty-nine, Patterson became the executive secretary of the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis, travelling internationally to publicize the legal battle. Throughout the 1980s, she continued to work for “justice, humanism, and community” (3).

Louise Thompson Patterson is a compelling, descriptive, and engaging narrative. Gilyard broadly presents a nuanced perspective on black women’s political activism. He challenges historians of the African American experience to reconceptualize ideas about activism, radical politics, and the different ways in which black women reshaped the American Left. Moreover, Gilyard’s *Louise Thompson Patterson* is a welcome addition to existing biographical studies on radical black women political leaders.

LaShawn Harris
Michigan State University